Trees on Black Mountain

By C. Millar

We are so fortunate in the Okanagan to have mixed forests. Black Mountain itself, is home to several varieties of trees. I have looked at eight trees which you can find here. Each has unique characteristics and all provide sustenance to the many creatures of this park.

The Ponderosa Pine

When I moved to Kelowna from Ontario twenty some years ago, I thought I would miss the fall colours and the White Pine the most. And then I saw the Ponderosa Pine and knew the Okanagan environment had its own wondrous trees. Beyond the Ponderosa Pine's stature and the beauty of its reddish textured trunk and its large cones, I learned about its scent from a hiker who had once worked as a forester. He scraped a wee bit of sap from the bark and had us smell it. It had the rich smell of vanilla. Lovely. I also admire it for its resiliency. Because a mature Ponderosa lacks low limbs and has a thick bark, it is well protected from forest fires. A blessing in this dry region.

I've learned that the Ponderosa can live to between 250 and 400 years but the average city trees are about 60 to 70 years old. So it broke my heart when I recently saw dozens of Ponderosa cut down and put into heaps ready for the chipper along Crawford Road. After all the decimation of pines from the pine beetle, aren't there laws about how many of these trees you can cut on your property? So next time you pass by a Ponderosa Pine, give it a hug.

The Douglas-fir

The Douglas-fir is named Pseudotsuga menziesil in Latin. It means 'false fir' because in fact it isn't a fir at all. Although more common on Vancouver Island, you can find Douglas-Fir on Black Mountain above the grasslands. These trees are also tall and fire resistant with their thick bark and sparse lower branches. You know what I mean by tall if you've ever visited Cathedral Grove on your way to Tofino. They can grow to 85 metres high (278 feet) and can live for up to 600 or even 1,000 years. Impressive!

The cones of the Douglas-fir are smaller than the Ponderosa Pine and can be identified by the little spikes that protrude from the cone. The Indigenous legend of the cone tells of a great fire in the forest that sent animals fleeing. However, the little mice could not flee quickly enough, so they asked the Douglas-fir if they could save them. The Douglas-fir obliged and invited them to hide in their cones. So if you look closely at the cones you will see all the little mice hind legs and tails protruding from them.

The Western Red Cedar

Again a tall tree with potentially a long life span. It can grow to 70 metres (230 feet) and live for 1,000 years. This tree likes water and can be found along the stream by the forest service road. Although much less common in the interior, it is found here and is still a valuable tree today. Its wood is strong, rot resistant and very versatile. Used largely in home construction today, it had myriad uses by Indigenous people.

The roots of the tree could be braided and made into pots as it is heat resistant and water tight. Its bark which strips off into long, pliable sinews was made into clothing, mats and baskets. It was also used to make fishing nets and even baby diapers. Most notably, the wood was used to make the longhouses, totem poles and masks associated with the coastal peoples. As well, large ocean going canoes and paddles were made from the wood. The flat swooping branches and sweet scent of the Western Red Cedar makes this tree an elegant addition to the local eco-system.

The Western Larch

One of the joys of autumn in the higher elevations of the Okanagan is seeing the golden glow of the larches in the sunshine. You can find larches on the higher elevations of Black Mountain including along the forest service road. As winter encroaches, the needles darken and fall off; the only conifers that do so. This is an advantage in winter when the heavy snowfall cannot accumulate on the branches and cause them to sag and break. No wonder their happy branches shoot upwards in all directions like they are dancing.

While visiting the Myra Canyon Trestles this autumn, I noticed the profusion of larches of the same size all grouped together. It caused me to wonder if they like to grow after a big fire like the one of 2003. I learned that they do. They shoot up quickly into the sunshine they crave dwarfing the associate trees which grow more slowly in the larches' shade. They grow in wet, cool areas but also on dry, hot easterly sides of forest slopes.

The mature trees are very fire resistant as they have thick bark and high branches and low flammability foliage. They can reach to 55 metres (180 feet) and can live over 500 years. Larches are just the right habitat for nesting raptors but also provide seeds for smaller birds such as Red-poles and Pine Siskins.

The Rocky Mountain Juniper

Okanagan Xeriscape Photo

The Rocky Mountain Juniper is a tree, not to be confused with the Common Juniper which is a shrub. On one of our hikes we saw a juniper tree about 6 metres tall. You'll have to take my word for it and seek it out for yourself as I did not get a photo of it. It thrives on dry, rocky or sandy south facing ridges but also along streams or lake shores. Interestingly, the cones ripen in their second season so you can find two generations of cones on a single tree.

The resourceful Indigenous peoples traditionally used the wood for making bows, clubs and spoons. They also boil the boughs as a disinfectant and use them in sweat lodges and for smoking hides. The Dutch were the first to use the berries to flavour gin in the 17th century. The brothers Grimm wrote a well-known fairy tale called, *The Juniper Tree.* It's a bit gruesome, beware!

The Trembling Aspen

Have you ever listened to the sound of the clicking leaves of the aspen when the slightest wind blows? They make this lovely sound as the flattened leaf stalks, which are longer than the actual leaves, tremble and cause the leaves to tap against each other. These trees also provide a golden colour to the forests in autumn.

The aspens throw up suckers to produce many clones. So you see them often in clusters. The individual trees last for only 50 years or so. However, their soft rotting trunks provide homes for wood peckers and at one time was used to line the cradles of the Carrier People as it was soft and absorbent.

When I noticed a cluster of aspens with an odd colouring, I was told this was a result of a leaf mining insect. The Aspen Leafminer creates long twisting trails as you can see in the photo below. The insects feed off the soft inner tissue of the leaves. They don't usually harm the trees themselves.

The Water Birch

This tree can be found along with aspens by Gopher Creek. This is such an important shrub/tree because it has dense root systems and is therefore good for revegetating disturbed riparian sites. It is also ideal for small animals for food, protection and nesting opportunities.

It can be recognised by its multiple trunks, its leaves and its reddish bark. The leaves are shiny, yellowish-green on top and spotted underneath. The leaves are similar in size and shape to other birches and are double toothed. The bark also resembles other birches but does not peel.

The Water Birch grows in areas, in British Columbia, such as the central interior and west of the Rockies but is not found along the coast.

British Columbia Government, Tree Book

The Black Hawthorn

Sometimes called the Douglas Hawthorn, this shrub/tree also likes to grow along water sources such as streams or ponds. It can be found at one of the ephemeral ponds in the grasslands areas. Again, stabilizing banks and providing food and shelter for small birds and animals makes it vital to the riparian eco-systems of the park.

Its pretty clusters of white flowers that bloom in the spring belie its darker side. Thorns of 1 to 2 centimetres long grow along its branches. However, birds use this feature as protection.

The rare Northern Shrike is attracted to the thorns and not just for protection. This pretty songbird with its cheerful tune kills and dismembers insects, small birds, mammals and reptiles with its hooked bill, then impales its prey on thorns such as those of the hawthorn and proceeds to tear apart the prey and eat it. Sometimes it just leaves its victims on the thorns, perhaps like spiked heads of yore, the shrike likes to warn others that this is its territory. Beware intruders!

British Columbia Government, Tree Book

The Northern Shrike

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Trees don't just exist for our enjoyment, as you know, but provide so much more. For birds and animals they provide shelter, food and safety. Collectively, trees dampen noise, provide oxygen and prevent erosion. They are such a vital part of our lives.

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